

New York Times Bestselling Author

# SUSAN MALLERY

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## JUST *One* KISS



  
A Fool's Gold Romance

Susan Mallery

**Just One Kiss**

«HarperCollins»

## **Mallery S.**

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He won't hesitate to put his life on the line...but will he ever risk his heart? Falling for Justice Garret was a high point in Patience McGraw's awkward adolescence. Even after he disappeared, Patience never forgot the boy who captured her heart. Now, he's back in Fool's Gold, California, and her passion for him is as strong as ever. But how can she trust that he won't abandon her again—and her daughter, too? When bodyguard Justice Garrett was a young man, witness protection brought him to this idyllic town and he never forgot its warmth, or the sweet beauty of his childhood friend. He's returned to open a defense academy, and the Patience he once knew is all grown up. He can't resist her smile, or her curves. But Justice's past doesn't make him husband, or father, material. Patience and Justice think they'll succumb to just one kiss... Then one more... Okay, just one night together. But they might learn that falling in love is beyond anyone's control.

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Praise for New York Times bestselling author

SUSAN  
MALLERY

“There's a little fun, a little sizzle and a whole lot of homespun charm.”

—Publishers Weekly on Summer Nights

“Mallery infuses her story with eccentricity, gentle humor and small-town shenanigans, and readers...will enjoy the connection between Heidi and Rafe.”

—Publishers Weekly on Summer Days

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“An adorable, outspoken heroine and an intense hero...set the sparks flying in Mallery's latest lively, comic and touching family-centered story.”

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One of the Top 10 Romances of 2011!

—Booklist on Only Mine

“Mallery's prose is luscious and provocative.”

—Publishers Weekly

“Susan Mallery's gift for writing humor and tenderness makes all her books true gems.”

—RT Book Reviews

“Romance novels don't get much better than Mallery's expert blend of emotional nuance, humor and superb storytelling.”

—Booklist

Just One Kiss

Susan Mallery



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This one is for 2011 Fool's Gold Co-Head Cheerleader Michele, whose energy is surpassed only by her heart. Thanks, Michele, for everything! You're incredible!

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**PROLOGUE**

Fifteen years ago...

PATIENCE MCGRAW COULDN'T breathe. She placed her hand on top of her chest and wondered if it was possible to have a heart attack and die from fear. Or maybe anticipation. Her mind raced and her throat was tight and here she was, on possibly the most significant day of her life, and she couldn't catch her breath. Talk about lame.

"The snow's melting," Justice said, pointing toward the mountains just east of town.

Patience looked up and nodded. "It's getting warmer."

It's getting warmer? She held in a groan. Why did she have to sound so stupid? Why did she have to be so nervous? This was Justice, her best friend since he'd moved to Fool's Gold at the beginning of October last year. They'd met in the school cafeteria and they'd reached for the last cupcake. He'd let her have it; she'd offered to share. She figured because he was older, he would refuse, but he'd smiled instead and that day they'd become friends.

She knew him. They hung out together, played video games together, went to the movies together. It was fun. It was easy. Or it had been until a few weeks ago when she'd suddenly looked into Justice's dark blue eyes and felt something she'd never experienced before.

Her mom had reassured her it was normal. Patience was fourteen, Justice was sixteen and it was unlikely they would stay friends forever. But Patience wasn't sure she liked the change. Before, she hadn't had to think about everything she said or worry about what she wore, or how her hair looked. Now she was always thinking, which made it hard to just hang out.

After two months of sweating every word, every thought, every action, she was done. She was going to tell Justice the truth. That she liked him. That she wanted him to be more than her best friend. If he liked her back, well, she didn't know what would happen then, but she was sure it would be wonderful. If he didn't, she would probably die of a broken heart.

They walked through the quiet residential neighborhood of Fool's Gold. The small town was nestled in the foothills of the Sierra Nevadas. With spring chasing away winter, there were buds on trees and the first daffodils and tulips of the season swayed in the afternoon breeze. All of which had nothing to do with the fact that she was seriously scared. Because while talking about dying of a broken heart was very *Pride and Prejudice*—her mother's favorite book and movie—it might be painful and a little gross.

But she had to know. Had to stop wondering. She should just tell him and get it over with. There was a school dance in two weeks and she wanted to go with Justice.

She was pretty sure he didn't like anyone else. Although he was two years older than her, he didn't have a girlfriend and they always hung out together at lunch. Not that he'd tried to kiss her. She wasn't sure how she felt about kissing, but if she was going to have a boy kiss her, she wanted it to be Justice. Oh God, why did her stomach hurt so much?

"Patience?"

She jumped. "Huh?"

"Are you okay?"

She came to a stop and clutched her books to her chest. "I'm fine. Why do you ask?"

"You're quiet. Is something wrong?"

His eyes were so beautiful, she thought. Dark, dark blue. They crinkled a little at the corners when he laughed, which wasn't that often. He had a great smile. He was still kind of skinny, as if he'd grown too fast, but cute. And sweet to her.

"Justice, I need to ask you something."

He nodded and waited, facing her. "Sure. What?"

She opened her mouth, then closed it. Words disappeared as she got lost in fear and panic and—

"Hey, Justice."

They both turned and saw Ford Hendrix crossing the street toward them. Patience exhaled, both relieved and frustrated by the interruption.

Ford was one of six kids. Dark hair and eyes. All the girls thought he was hot, but Patience only saw Justice.

"Could you believe that history test?" Ford asked. He and Justice were the same age and had a lot of classes together. "Hey, Patience."

"Hi."

They all fell into step together, walking toward home, the moment lost.

"Man, why do we have to know that stuff?" Ford asked. "World War One was like a hundred years ago or something. That essay question..."

"Brutal," Justice finished for him.

Patience glanced at him and saw he was watching her, his expression questioning. She swallowed as she realized he might ask her what she'd wanted to talk about and she couldn't possibly say anything in front of Ford. He was a nice enough guy, but no way!

"I, um, need to get home," Patience said. "I'm going to cut through here. See you tomorrow."

"Patience, wait."

But she ignored Justice and hurried away, ducking around a house and through a backyard as she made her escape.

\* \* \*

THE NEXT MORNING, Patience was determined not to wait another second to tell Justice the truth. She'd spent a horrible night tossing and turning, feeling a little sick to her stomach. She couldn't keep doing this to herself. She was going to be brave. She was going to be honest. If things went really bad, she was sure her mom would be willing to move.

She walked from her house to Justice's, as she had every school morning for months now. He lived a couple of blocks closer to town so he was on her way. As she walked down the sidewalk, she

looked at the small two-bedroom house he shared with his uncle. Normally Justice would be sitting on the porch steps, waiting for her. Only he wasn't there this morning.

Did he know? Had he figured out what she wanted to tell him? Was he disgusted? Did he think she was a complete dork and was so embarrassed he couldn't speak to her?

Anxiety propelled her up the stairs. If it was bad, she wanted to hear it fast. He should just tell her the truth so she wouldn't hope. Then her heart would break and she could get over it and...

She paused on the porch as she realized the front door was partially open. As if someone had left it that way in a hurry. She frowned as she moved forward.

"Justice? Are you okay?"

She knocked once and the door swung open.

She'd been in the small house dozens of times. There was a living room with a tiny dining room and kitchen beyond. There were two bedrooms and a single bathroom in the back. She remembered a sofa and a couple of chairs, some kind of coffee table.

Only all of that was gone now. The living room was empty, as was the dining room beyond. There was nothing. Not a cushion or a box or a scrap of paper. It was as if no one had ever lived here at all.

Patience slowly walked through the house. Her breathing sounded loud in the stillness. She didn't understand. How could everything be gone?

The kitchen was as vacant as the rest of the place. The cupboards stood open, the shelves bare. The sink was empty, as were all the drawers. In Justice's bedroom, there was no hint he had ever lived there.

She returned to the living room and blinked away sudden tears. She turned in a slow circle, fear growing inside her.

This wasn't right. People didn't just disappear in the night. Something had happened. Something bad.

She darted out the front door and ran all the way home. She burst in the back door and yelled for her mom.

"Justice is gone! He's gone and his uncle's gone and all their stuff."

Her mother hurried into the living room. "What are you talking about?"

Patience told her what had happened. Ava grabbed a jacket, then followed her out the back door. Ten minutes later she was gazing at the empty interior. Fifteen minutes after that, the police had arrived.

Patience watched the activity and listened to the conversation. No one knew what had happened. No one had heard anything or seen anything. But they all agreed it was very strange. Justice and his uncle had disappeared. It was as if they'd never been there at all.

## CHAPTER ONE

"TRIM UP my eyebrows," Alfred said, wiggling his white, bushy brows as he spoke. "I want to look sexy."

Patience McGraw held in a smile. "Big night planned with the missus?"

"You know it."

A concept that would be romantic, if Alfred and his lovely wife were a tad younger than, say, ninety-five. Patience had to keep herself from blurting out a warning that, at their age, they should be careful. She supposed the more important lesson was that true love and passion could last a lifetime.

"I'm jealous," she told her client as she carefully trimmed his brows.

"You picked a piss-poor excuse of a man," Albert told her, then shrugged. "Excuse my French."

"I can't complain about you telling the truth," Patience said, wondering what it would be like to live in a bigger city. Where everyone didn't know every detail of your personal life. But she'd been born in Fool's Gold and had grown up with the idea that there were very few secrets between friends and neighbors.

Which meant the whole town knew that she'd gotten pregnant when she was eighteen and the "piss-poor excuse for a man" who'd been her baby's father had walked out on her and her daughter less than a year later.

"You'll find someone," Alfred told her, gently patting her arm. "A pretty girl like you should have them lined up for miles."

She smiled. "You're very sweet. If I didn't know better, I'd say you were flirting with me."

Alfred gave her a wink.

Despite his compliments, she managed to find herself amazingly man free. Fool's Gold wasn't exactly swimming with prospects, and as a single mother, she had to be especially careful. There was also the fact that most of the men she met weren't interested in other men's kids.

As Patience picked up the scissors to clip a couple of errant hairs, she told herself that she was very comfortable with her life. Given the choice, she would rather open her own business than fall in love. But every now and then, she found herself longing for someone to lean on. A man to care about, who would be there for her.

She stood back and studied Albert's reflection. "You're even more handsome than before," she said, putting down her tools and unfastening his cape.

"Hard to believe," Albert said with a grin.

She laughed.

"Patience?"

She didn't recognize the male voice, but turned anyway. A man stood in the entrance of the shop.

Her mind registered several things at once. Albert was her last appointment of the day. If the guy was a walk-in, he wouldn't call her by name. The man was tall, with dark gold-blond hair and deep blue eyes. His shoulders were broad and he had the kind of face that would be happy up on a movie screen. Nice, but she had no idea who he...

She felt the cape flutter to the floor as she really looked at the man moving toward her. He was a few inches taller, a lot more muscular, but his eyes... They were exactly the same. They even crinkled when he smiled at her.

"Hello, Patience."

She was fourteen again, standing in that empty house, more scared than she'd ever been in her life. There hadn't been any answers. Not then or since. No solution to the mystery. Just questions and a gnawing sense that something had gone terribly wrong.

"Justice?" she asked, her voice more breath than sound. "Justice?"

He gave her a slight shrug. The familiar gesture was enough to send her flying across the shop. She flung herself at him, determined to hang on this time.

He caught her against him and held on to her nearly as tightly as she held on to him. He was warm and solid and real. She pressed her head against his shoulder and inhaled the scent of him. A clean, masculine smell that had nothing to do with the boy she remembered. This wasn't happening, she thought, still dazed. Justice couldn't be back.

Yet he was. But the man was very different from the boy, and the moment got awkward quickly. She stepped away and put her hands on her hips.

"What happened? You left me! Where on earth did you go? I was so scared. The whole town was worried. I called the police and everything."

He glanced around the salon. Patience didn't have to follow his gaze to know they were the center of attention. She was used to the friendly interest of the shop, but Justice might find the attention uncomfortable.

"When can you take a break?" he asked.

"Five minutes. Alfred is my last client of the day."

"I'll be outside."

He was gone before she could stop him, moving with a combination of power and purpose. The second the door closed behind him, the other stylists and half the clients descended.

“Who is he?” Julia, her boss, demanded. “What a handsome man.”

“I’ve seen him around town before,” another woman said. “With that ballet dancer. He was her bodyguard.”

“Has he moved here?”

“Is he an old boyfriend?”

Alfred cleared his throat. “Back away, ladies. Give Patience some room to breathe.”

Patience smiled at him gratefully. He paid her for the cut and gave her a fifty-cent tip. She was so not getting rich working here, she thought as she walked him to the door and kissed his cheek.

With Alfred gone, she returned to her station and quickly cleaned up. Julia watched with unconcealed interest.

“You’ll have details tomorrow?” she asked.

“Of course.”

Sharing was as much a part of the culture of Fool’s Gold as showing up with a casserole when there was a birth, death or serious illness. She might not want to reveal every detail of her upcoming encounter with a man from her past, but that wasn’t her decision.

Patience made a quick stop in the restroom to make sure she hadn’t spilled anything on her black T-shirt. She released her long brown hair from its ponytail, thought briefly that she should have gotten highlights, and worn makeup and hey, maybe been something more exciting than ordinary, then shrugged. She was who she was, and nothing short of serious plastic surgery and/or a makeover was going to change her now.

She applied lip gloss and brushed the front of her “Chez Julia” T-shirt one last time. Two minutes later she had her purse and was walking out onto the sidewalk.

Justice was still there. All six-two of him. He wore a dark suit, blinding white shirt and a smoky-gray tie.

“You weren’t this stylish a dresser fifteen years ago,” she said.

“Occupational hazard.”

“Which begs the question, what occupation? But that can wait.” She looked at him, trying to reconcile the man with the teenager she’d known and loved. Well, maybe not loved, but liked a lot. He’d been her first crush. She’d wanted to tell him, to have him for her boyfriend and then he’d been gone. “What happened?”

He glanced around. “Can I buy you a cup of coffee?”

“Sure.” She pointed down the street. “There’s a Starbucks this way.”

They started down the sidewalk. A thousand questions filled her mind, but she couldn’t seem to grab any one to ask it. She was both curious and shy—a combination that didn’t make for easy conversation.

“How long have you—”

“I would have thought you’d—”

They spoke at the same time.

She sighed. “We’ve lost our rhythm. That’s just so sad.”

“It’ll come back,” he assured her. “Give it a minute.”

They reached the Starbucks and he held open the door. She paused before stepping past him.

“You’re here for good?” she asked. “Or at least a while?”

“Yes.”

“No disappearing in the night?”

“No.”

She nodded. “I didn’t know what to think. I was so scared.”

His dark blue gaze settled on her face. “I’m sorry. I knew you’d be worried. I wanted to say something, but I couldn’t.”

She saw a couple of older women approaching and ducked into the store. As she walked to the counter, she pulled out her Starbucks card, but Justice waved it away.

“I’m buying,” he told her. “It’s the least I can do after what happened.”

“Ha. Sure, bring me out for coffee instead of a steak when you’re doing apology buying.”

He flashed her a smile that was so familiar she felt her heart constrict. At the same time, she experienced a very distinct “wow—handsome guy” tingle in the area just south of her belly button. It had been so long it took her a second to recognize sexual attraction.

She was pathetic, she thought as she ordered her usual grande skinny vanilla latte. This was the closest she’d come to dating in the past five or six years. She really needed to get out more. And just as soon as she had a little free time, she would work on that.

“Tall drip,” Justice told the girl.

Patience rolled her eyes. “Very masculine. I’m not even surprised.”

He flashed her another smile. “I don’t strike you as the soy-chai-latte type?”

“No, but I’d pay to watch you drink one.”

“Not enough money in the world.”

They moved aside to wait for their orders, then took them over to a table in the corner.

“You probably want to sit with your back to the wall, right?” she asked, taking a seat that would allow him to do just that.

“Why would you think that?”

“Someone said you’re a bodyguard. Is it true?”

He settled across from her, his broad shoulders and large frame seeming to challenge the space around them.

“I work for a company that provides protection,” he admitted.

She sipped her coffee. “You can’t just say yes?”

“What?”

“The answer is yes. Wouldn’t that be easier than telling me you work for a company that provides protection?”

He leaned toward her. “Were you this much of a pain in the ass when we were kids?”

She grinned. “I’ve mellowed with age.” She raised her latte. “Welcome back, Justice.”

\* \* \*

PATIENCE’S BROWN EYES danced with amusement, just as Justice remembered. She’d gotten a little taller and had filled out in fascinatingly female ways, but otherwise she was the same. Sassy, he thought. Not a word he would have used as a teenager, but one that suited her perfectly now. The Patience he recalled had been all attitude and blunt talk. It looked as though that hadn’t changed.

She glanced around the coffee place and sighed. “There are, what, five million of these across the country? We need something different.”

“You don’t like Starbucks?”

“No,” Patience said as she sipped on her latte. “I adore Starbucks. We own stock and everything. But don’t you think a town like Fool’s Gold should have a local place, too? I would love to open my own coffee place. Silly, huh?”

“Why is it silly?”

“It’s not a big dream. Shouldn’t dreams be big? Like I want to end world hunger?”

“You’re allowed to dream for yourself.”

She studied him. “What do you dream about?”

He wasn’t much of a dreamer. He wanted what other people took for granted. The chance to be like everyone else. Only that wasn’t going to happen.

“Ending world hunger.”

She laughed. The happy sound took him back in years to when they'd been kids together. He'd been forced to lie every second of every day. He'd been discouraged from making friends and fitting in too much, but he'd defied them all, claiming Patience as his own. Even then he'd known he was different, but he'd still wanted to belong. Being friends with her had been the only "normal" part of his life. He'd needed her to survive.

His choice had been selfish and she'd paid the price for his decision. When he'd had to leave, he hadn't been able to tell her why. Later, he'd known getting in touch with her would bring her into his world. He'd liked Patience too much to sully her with that.

So what was his excuse now? As he stared into her eyes, he knew he'd again chosen what he wanted rather than what was right for her. But he'd been unable to resist the call of his past. Maybe he'd secretly been hoping she wasn't as good as he remembered. Now he had to deal with the fact that she was even better.

She leaned toward him. "You've stalled long enough, Justice. What happened all those years ago? One second you were there and the next you were gone."

She still wore her brown hair long. He remembered the slight wave and how her hair had moved as she walked, swinging back and forth. Sexy.

He'd been too old for her then. At least that's what he'd told himself every time he'd been tempted to kiss her. An eighteen-year-old masquerading as a sixteen-year-old, to outwit the man who wanted him dead.

"I was in the witness protection program."

Her eyes widened and her mouth dropped open.

He let the words sink in and took a moment to study the cartoon hairstylist on the front of her black "Chez Julia" T-shirt. The drawn hairdresser was wielding scissors with comical intent.

"Are you kidding?" Patience asked. "Seriously? Here?"

"Where better than Fool's Gold?"

"That can't be real. It sounds like something from the movies."

"It was plenty real." He sipped his coffee and thought about his past. He rarely talked about it. Even his closest friends weren't privy to the details.

"My father was a career criminal," he said slowly. "The kind of man who believed the world owed him a living. He went from one scheme to the next. If he'd put half as much effort into working a steady job, he could have made a fortune, but that wasn't his way."

Patience's eyes widened as she held on to her cup. "Please don't make me cry with your story."

He raised one shoulder. "I'll do my best to stick to the facts."

"Because they won't make me cry?" She drew in a breath. "Okay, bad father. And then what?"

"When I was seventeen, he and a couple of buddies held up a convenience store. The owner and a clerk were killed and my dad was the one who pulled the trigger. The friends were caught and gave up my dad. Bart. His name was Bart Hanson." Justice had been born Bart Hanson Jr., but he'd rejected that name years ago. Had it legally changed. He'd wanted nothing that had belonged to his father.

"The local SWAT team came to take him in. Dad wasn't going without a fight. He'd planned everything and was going to take out as many officers as he could. I figured out what he was going to do and jumped on his back. I distracted him long enough for the police to get him. He wasn't happy with me."

An understatement, he thought. His father had cursed him, vowing to punish his son, no matter what it took. Everyone who knew Bart Hanson had believed he was more than capable of murdering his only child.

"That's so horrible. Where was your mother in all this?"

"She'd died years before. A car accident."

He didn't bother mentioning that the car's brakes had been cut. Local law enforcement had suspected Bart but had been unable to make the charges stick.

“When I testified against my father, his anger turned to rage. Right after sentencing, he broke out of jail and came after me. I was put into a witness protection program and brought here. That’s when we met.”

She shook her head. “That’s amazing, and scary. I can’t believe you went through all that. You never hinted or…” She looked at him. “Seventeen? You were seventeen? I thought you were fifteen. We celebrated your birthday when you turned sixteen.”

“I lied.”

“About your age?”

“It was part of me being in the program. I was two years older than you thought. Still am.”

He could see she wasn’t amused by the joke. “I was only fourteen.”

“I know. That’s why I never—” He picked up his coffee. “Anyway, my dad was spotted in the area. I was living with a marshal at the time. The decision was made to get me out of town immediately. I wanted to tell you, Patience. But I couldn’t. By the time my dad was caught and put away, so much time had passed. I wasn’t sure you’d remember me.”

Or that he should get in touch with her. Even now, telling her the sanitized version of his past was a lot for her to take in. She looked dazed. He’d lived it and he still had trouble believing it had happened.

“What happened to your father?” she asked. “Is he still behind bars?”

“He’s dead. Died in a prison fire.”

Burned beyond recognition, he thought. Bart had been identified using dental records. A hell of a way to go, Justice thought, still aware that he felt nothing for the old man. Nothing except relief he was gone.

The question of how much of his father lived within him wasn’t anything he was going to discuss with her. That was for the late nights when he was alone and the shadows pressed in. Patience wasn’t a part of that. She was light to his dark, and he didn’t want that to change.

“My head is spinning,” she admitted, then put down her coffee. “You know what’s really twisted? I’m actually still more surprised that you were eighteen when I thought you were sixteen than the fact that you were in a witness protection program because your father wanted you dead. I think that means there’s something wrong with me. I apologize for that.”

He smiled at her. “At least you have priorities.”

She studied him for a second, then ducked her head. “I can’t imagine what you had to go through. Here I was, feeling sorry for myself because I had this crazy crush on you. I wanted to tell you. In fact, I was going to that last day, but Ford walked up.”

He told himself the information was interesting but not important. Even so, he felt a sense of satisfaction, quickly followed by a sense of loss. He’d often wondered what would have happened if he’d just been a regular kid who happened to live in Fool’s Gold. Unfortunately his luck had never been that good.

He knew if he were a halfway-decent guy, he would walk away now. That a man like him had no place in her life. But he couldn’t leave, just as he’d never been able to forget.

“I remember that day,” he admitted. “You were acting like there was something on your mind.”

“There was. You. At fourteen, my girlish heart trembled whenever you were around.”

He liked the sound of that. “That bad, huh?”

She nodded. “I took hope in the fact that you didn’t seem interested in anyone else, but was worried you only saw me as a friend. I was determined to tell you the truth. I was also terrified. What if you didn’t like me back?”

“I did like you. But I was too old for you.”

“I see that now.” She grinned. “Eighteen. How is that possible? I’m totally freaked. I’ll recover but I’ll need a moment.” Her smile faded. “Justice, when you were just gone it was… Well, we all missed you and were worried about you.”

He reached across the table and lightly touched the back of her hand. “I know. I’m sorry about that.”

“It was like you were never there in the first place. I used to walk by the house and hope you’d show up as mysteriously as you’d left.”

He’d hoped she had done that, he admitted, if only to himself. He’d often thought of her, wondering if she remembered him. Some days memories of Patience were all that had gotten him through.

“Were you really here last fall?” she asked.

“Briefly. I had a client.”

“Dominique Guérin. I know. I’m friends with her daughter.” Patience tilted her head. “Why didn’t you look me up then?”

Before he could figure out an excuse that sounded better than he’d been apprehensive—which was, he admitted, a fancy way to say “scared”—a girl walked into the store. She was maybe ten or eleven with long brown hair and familiar brown eyes. She glanced around, then skipped over to their table.

“Hi, Mom.”

Patience turned and smiled. “Hey, baby. How’d you know I was here?”

“Julia told me you were going for coffee.” Her gaze slid to Justice. “With a man.”

Patience sighed. “This town does love to gossip.” She put her arm around the girl. “Lillie, this is Justice Garrett. He’s a friend of mine. Justice, this is my daughter, Lillie.”

## CHAPTER TWO

AS SOON AS Patience said the word daughter, she knew there was a problem. How was she supposed to casually mention she wasn’t married in front of her daughter and while Justice’s gaze slid directly to her left ring finger? Just as complicated was the burning need to cut to the chase and blurt out “I’m single.” A need she resisted. Giving him information was one thing. Sounding desperate was another.

“Hi,” Lillie said, leaning into Patience, her expression both shy and curious. “How do you know Mom?”

“I knew her when she was only a little older than you.”

Lillie turned to her. “Really, Mom?”

“Uh-huh. I was fourteen when I knew Justice. He lived here for a while. Then he had to move away. We’re old friends.”

More friends than old, she thought. At least that was her hope.

She kept her arm around her daughter. “Lillie is ten and the smartest, most talented, beautiful girl in all of Fool’s Gold.”

Her daughter giggled. “Mom always says that.” She leaned toward Justice and lowered her voice. “It’s not really true, but she loves me so she believes it.”

“That’s the best kind of love to have.”

She was about to go for it and say she wasn’t married when it occurred to her that she didn’t know anything about Justice’s personal life. She sucked in a breath and fought against the heat she felt burning on her cheeks. What if he was half of a happy couple with a dozen or so charmingly attractive children?

Why, oh why had she admitted she had a crush on him without getting a few facts? She really had to start practicing thinking before speaking. The evening news was always showing great stories about some eighty-year-old getting a high school diploma or learning to read. Surely she could teach herself to self-edit.

“Justice has moved back to Fool’s Gold,” Patience said. “He’s going to...” She paused. “I have no idea what you’re going to do here.”

“Open a bodyguard training facility. My partners and I haven’t worked out the details yet, but we’re going to offer security training for professionals along with corporate team building and survival training.”

“Stuff you do outside?” Lillie asked.

“Uh-huh.”

“Mom doesn’t like going outside.”

Justice turned to her and raised an eyebrow.

“I’m not a huge fan of weather and dirt,” Patience explained. “It’s not like I have to live in a plastic bubble.” She offered a weak smile. “So, um, you’ll be moving your family here?”

“You have a family?” Lillie asked. “Any kids?”

“No. It’s just me.”

A score for the home team, Patience thought with relief. “Lillie is the only one I have,” she said, hoping she sounded casual. “Her dad and I split a long time ago.”

“I don’t remember him,” Lillie offered. “I don’t see him.” She looked as though she was going to say something else, then stopped.

Patience had hoped for some reaction from Justice at the news of her not being married. A fist pump would have been perfect, but there wasn’t any hint as to what he was thinking. At least he didn’t bolt out of the building. She supposed she could take that as a good sign. And he had looked her up on his own. It wasn’t as if she’d gone looking for him or they’d run into each other.

On the other hand, he’d probably left the witness protection program years ago and he’d never bothered to get in touch with her. The men in her life tended to leave. Her father. Lillie’s dad. Justice. A case could be made that Justice hadn’t chosen to leave, but he also hadn’t chosen to reconnect. At least not until now.

She drew in a breath. She needed a bit of distance to gain some perspective. Justice was an old friend. She didn’t have to make any assessments of his character at this very second. She also had errands to run and a thousand life details to take care of. She wanted to spend more time with him, to get to know the man he’d become. Just not here in the middle of town.

“Come to dinner,” she said before she could stop herself. “Please. I’d like to catch up more and I know my mom would love to see you.”

His expression softened. “She still lives around here?”

“We all live together,” Lillie told him. “Mom and me and Grandma. It’s a house of women.”

Patience laughed. “Obviously a phrase she’s heard before.” She shrugged. “I’m back at home. I moved out briefly while I was married, then came back with Lillie. It works out for all of us.” Ava had company, Patience had support so she could feel less like a single parent and Lillie had the constancy kids craved.

His dark blue eyes didn’t seem to judge, for which she was grateful. “How’s your mom doing?”

“Pretty well. She has good days and bad days.”

“It’s lasagna night,” Lillie told him. “With garlic bread.”

Justice gave her an easy smile. “Well, then. How could I say no?” He turned his attention to Patience. “What time?”

“Six work for you?”

“It does.”

She stood. “Great. We’ll see you then. You remember where the house is?”

He rose and nodded. “I’ll see you at six.”

\* \* \*

PATIENCE FORCED HERSELF to walk at her usual pace. She wanted to run, or at the very least, skip or jump. But that would require an explanation and probably some nervous phone calls from neighbors to local law enforcement.

Lillie chatted about her day at school. Patience did her best to pay attention, but she had a difficult time. Her mind kept wandering back to her unexpected encounter with Justice. She couldn't wrap her mind around the fact that he'd shown up without warning. Talk about a blast from the past.

They turned up the walkway leading to the house. She paused, looking at it with a critical eye, wondering what Justice would see.

The color was different. Pale yellow instead of white. The winter had been late with the first snow not arriving until Christmas Eve, but then hanging around for weeks. Daffodils, crocuses and tulips had arrived in mid-March to brighten up the garden. The last of them were making one final effort before disappearing in the warming days of spring. The lawn wasn't too bad and the front porch looked inviting. She'd put out the bench and two chairs just the previous weekend.

The house itself was two stories. Like many homes in this part of town, it had been built in the 1940s and was a Craftsman style with big front windows and lots of little details like built-ins and moldings.

Lillie led the way up the stairs and through the front door.

Inside there weren't many changes. A different sofa, a couple of new appliances in the kitchen. When Patience had moved back shortly after her divorce, her mother had made a few modifications. The three bedrooms upstairs had become two, with the smaller rooms being combined into a decent-sized master suite. A second master had already been added off the main floor. It jutted out into the oversized backyard. A necessary addition, given Ava's condition.

When Patience was thirteen, her mother had been diagnosed with MS. If there was a "good" kind, Ava had it. The disease progressed slowly and she was still mobile. But there were hard days and climbing the stairs had become too difficult. With the additional master downstairs, that wasn't necessary.

"Grandma, Grandma, guess who I met today?" Lillie asked as she burst into the house.

Ava was in her home office. An open area with a desk, three computer monitors and keyboards. A technological marvel that could make NASA envious. Apparently computer smarts skipped a generation. Lillie could do almost anything on a computer, while Patience had trouble working her smartphone.

"Who did you meet?" Ava asked, holding open her arms.

Lillie ran toward her and retrieved her afternoon hug. They hung on to each other for several seconds, a daily ritual Patience always found gratifying.

"Justice Garrett," Patience said, standing in the doorway to the study.

Her mother stared at her. "That boy who disappeared?"

"That's the one. He's back in town, and he's not a boy anymore."

Ava smiled. "I would hope not. As it is, he has plenty of explaining to do. What happened? Did he say where he'd been?"

"He was in the witness protection program."

Ava's eyes widened. "Seriously?"

Patience glanced at Lillie, a signal that she didn't want to go into the details right then. Her ten-year-old didn't need to know there were parents awful enough to want to kill their own children.

"We invited him to dinner," Lillie said. "He said yes after I told him about the lasagna."

"Of course," her grandmother said. "Who could resist lasagna?"

Lillie laughed.

"He'll be here at six." Patience glanced at her watch. That gave her barely enough time to shower, put on makeup and obsess about what to wear.

Ava's brown eyes twinkled. "You probably want to go get ready."

"I thought I might change my clothes. It's not that big a deal."

"Of course not."

"He's just an old friend."

“Yes, he is.”

Patience grinned. “Don’t make this more than it is.”

“Would I do that?”

“In a heartbeat.”

\* \* \*

AT TWENTY MINUTES to six, Patience was in her bedroom. She’d showered, blown out her long, wavy hair until it was straight, traded in her work T-shirt for a light green twin set in a fine-gauge knit and her black jeans for a dark blue fitted pair. Then she’d put on a dress, followed by a shirt and blouse before settling on jeans and a long-sleeved T-shirt that proclaimed her the queen of everything. She was the single mother of a ten-year-old who also happened to live in the same house where she’d grown up, with her mother. There wasn’t an outfit on the planet that could disguise the truth. Not that she wanted to change anything about her life. Or apologize. She’d made a good life for herself and her daughter. It’s just that thinking about Justice made her nervous. He would either respect her choices, good and bad, or he would go away.

She went downstairs and found her mother and Lillie in the kitchen. The table was set. The last of the tulips in the garden had been cut and placed in a glass vase. The smell of lasagna and garlic filled the house.

“Relax,” her mother told her.

“I’m relaxed. Shrill and relaxed. It’s a great combination.”

Ava smiled with amusement. “So, is Justice coming alone?”

“Yes. He said he wasn’t married.”

“And he doesn’t have kids,” Lillie offered. “He should have a family.”

Patience turned to her mother. “Don’t you start anything.”

“Me? I’m happy to welcome one of your school friends back to town. Nothing more.”

“Uh-huh. Let’s keep it that way.”

“I am curious about his past, though.”

Patience held in a groan. “Please, Mom, you can’t.”

“I’m the mother,” Ava reminded her with a wink. “I can do just about anything.”

\* \* \*

JUSTICE STOOD ON the sidewalk and stared at the familiar house. Very little had changed. The color, maybe the garden, but nothing else. Off to the side, he could see a wheelchair ramp, but it led to the back door rather than the front. For Ava, he thought.

As he walked up the stairs, he braced for what he might find. Patience’s mother had always welcomed him into their home. She’d been kind and motherly. As a kid who’d grown up surrounded by a lot of fear, he’d soaked up the affection she’d offered. She provided an emotional haven and he’d missed her nearly as much as he’d missed Patience when he’d had to leave.

He didn’t know a lot about her disease, but he knew it was relentless and cruel. He told himself he’d seen worse. That his job was not to react. Then he rang the bell.

Lillie opened it seconds later and smiled at him. “Hi,” she said cheerfully. “I’m glad you’re here. I’m starving and the garlic bread smells so good.” She stepped back to allow him entry, then turned to yell, “Mom, Mr. Garrett is here.”

Patience walked into the living room. “Indoor voice, remember?” She glanced at him. “Hi.”

“Hi, yourself. Thanks for the invitation to dinner.”

She looked good. Her hair was long and sleek with the kind of shine that invited hands to touch. She wore jeans and a T-shirt with a girl in a crown on the front. “Queen of Everything” was written underneath. She was curvy enough to keep things intriguing, and when she smiled, he felt as if he’d been kicked in the gut. Fourteen-year-old Patience had made his voice crack. Grown-up Patience was physically beautiful, emotionally sweet and intellectually challenging. A lethal combination.

He'd always tried not to be like his father. When in doubt he thought about what Bart would do and did the opposite. Now he realized that the decent thing was to walk away. Only he didn't want to.

"You're welcome," she said. "It'll be fun to catch up."

He passed her the bottle of wine he'd brought. A nice California Cabernet the store owner had promised would go with pasta. Their fingers brushed and he felt a jolt of attraction. Swearing silently, he took a deliberate step back. No way. Not with Patience. He refused to screw up one of the few decent memories he had in his life. She was his friend, nothing more.

"There you are. All grown up."

He shifted toward the voice and saw Ava walk into the room.

She looked the same, he thought, accepting the relief as both truth and a statement that he really had to work on his character. But it was a flaw he was willing to accept. He needed Ava to be okay, not just for herself, but for him, as well. To keep his connection to the past.

She was a couple of inches shorter than Patience, with the same brown hair. Hers was in tight curls that brushed her shoulders. She had big brown eyes and an easy smile. When she held out her arms, he moved into them instinctively.

She hugged him close. He'd forgotten what it was like to be hugged by Ava. To be engulfed in a circle of acceptance and affection. She held on as if she would never let go, as if she would always be there. She hugged like a mom who genuinely loved all kids and wanted you to know. When he was a kid, Ava had been something of a revelation. The marshals had done their best to give him a stable home, but they'd been employees on the clock. Ava had been his best friend's mom. She'd made him cookies and talked to him about going to college. Just as if he was a regular kid.

"I was nervous about seeing you," he admitted, speaking softly so only she could hear.

She squeezed tighter, then released him. "I have good days and bad days." She tilted her head.

He followed her gaze and saw the wheelchair folded up in the corner of what was clearly her home office.

"This is a very good day," she told him, still holding his gaze. "We were so worried about you."

"I know. I'm sorry. I would have told you if I could have."

"You came back. That's what matters." She turned to her granddaughter. "You're hungry, aren't you?"

Lillie danced in place. "Yes. Very. I'm starving."

Ava held her hand out to the girl. "Then let's get the salads on the table. Patience, why don't you have Justice open that bottle of wine he brought?"

Patience waited until they'd walked into the kitchen to lean close. "She's still running the world, as you can see."

"She's great and looks terrific. With her disease..." He wasn't sure what he wanted to ask.

Patience nodded and led him to a hutch in the formal dining room. She pulled open a drawer and removed a wine opener.

"She's had a couple of bad episodes, but then she went into remission. It came back, but it's not aggressive right now. Most days she can't do stairs. Technically she probably could, but it takes so much out of her. The issues have mostly been in her legs, which means she can still work with no problem."

Ava was a software designer. She'd started back when computers were novelties. Her job allowed her to work from home—a plus considering that her husband had walked out when she'd been diagnosed. When Patience had told him that, he'd realized that a father didn't have to pull a gun or use his fists to hurt his family. Pain came in all forms.

He went to work on the wine bottle. Patience collected glasses from the hutch.

"She's the bravest person I know," she continued. "She's always so cheerful and caring. I would want to scream at the unfairness of it all, but she never does." She smiled. "I want to be like my mom when I grow up."

“She inspires me, too,” he admitted. “When I was in a tough spot, I would think about Ava and remind myself I had it easy.”

Patience blinked several times, as if fighting emotion. “You’re very slick, Mr. Garrett. You could have flattered me with meaningless compliments, but instead you slip right past my defenses by saying that about my mother.”

“I meant it,” he said, looking into her eyes and inhaling the scent of something clean with a hint of flowers. Not perfume, he thought, remembering. Essence of Patience. “I’m not slick. I’m telling the truth. I’ve seen what it takes to be brave, and your mom has it.” He knew the danger of getting close, but couldn’t help reaching out and lightly touching her cheek. “It’s me, Patience. I know it’s been a long time, but no defenses required.”

Although as soon as he said the words, he realized he should have kept his mouth shut. Patience was right to be wary of him.

Something clattered to the floor in the kitchen. Patience turned toward the sound. Justice used the distraction to pick up the wine, thereby putting distance between them.

Fifteen minutes later they were all seated at the table. Lillie had sniffed her mother’s glass of wine and wrinkled her nose, declaring the smell “icky.” The lasagna was sitting on the counter, ready to be served, and they had their salads in front of them.

Patience raised her glass. “Welcome home, Justice,” she said.

“Thank you.”

They all took sips of their drinks. Lillie put her milk down and turned to her grandmother.

“Mr. Garrett is a bodyguard.” She wrinkled her nose. “Like on TV, right?”

Patience had called him Mr. Garrett to make a point. Lillie was doing it because of how she was raised. “If it’s okay with your mom, you can call me Justice.”

Lillie beamed. “Is it, Mom?”

“Sure.”

Lillie sat a little straighter and cleared her throat. “Justice is a bodyguard, Grandma.”

“I heard.” Ava glanced at him. “That sounds dangerous. Is it?”

“Sometimes. Mostly I protect rich people who travel to hazardous places. I make sure they’re safe.”

“What are you doing in Fool’s Gold, then?” Patience asked. “We’re about as far from hazardous as you can get and still stay on the continent. Is it part of your new business?”

He nodded, then glanced at Ava. “I want to open a business with a couple of buddies of mine. We’ll provide training for security firms.”

Ava looked interested. “A bodyguard school?”

“We think of it as more comprehensive than that. We’ll provide instruction on strategy, weapons and other equipment. Up-to-the-minute reports on various conflicts in different parts of the world. In addition, we want to offer corporate retreats. Team building through activities. Obstacles courses and other physical challenges.”

Patience blinked. “Wow. That puts my idea of a coffeehouse to shame. I mean, I got as far as having a book club and maybe an open-mike comedy night, but that’s it.”

“My partners and I have been working on the plan for a while. We’ve been waiting to find the right place. Ford suggested Fool’s Gold, so when I came here last year, I checked it out.”

Ava’s surprise was evident in her voice.

“Ford? Ford Hendrix?”

He nodded. “We’ve been friends awhile now. We reconnected in the military. Our third partner is a guy named Angel Whittaker.”

“I’d heard Ford was returning,” Ava said, “but no one knows when. He’s been serving in the military for years.”

“He gets out in the next couple of months. He should be back then.”

Angel didn't care where they started the business, and once Justice had come back last year, he'd lobbied for Fool's Gold. He'd thought about looking up Patience then, but he had enough self-control to avoid her. This time, not so much.

"Who's Ford?" Lillie asked.

"You know the Hendrix triplets and Mrs. Hendrix," Patience said. "Ford is the youngest brother in the Hendrix family."

"Oh. He's old."

Ava smiled. "He's in his thirties, Lillie."

The girl looked confused. "That old?"

"Ah, to be young again." Ava picked up her fork and speared a piece of lettuce. "So, Justice, tell me what you've been doing for the past fifteen years. Did you get married?"

### CHAPTER THREE

PATIENCE SILENTLY VOWED she would never complain about her mother again. Not that she did it very much, but sometimes it was difficult sharing a house. Tonight, though, Ava had proved herself to be a master at getting information from anyone at any time.

By the time the dinner plates had been cleared and the dessert served, Justice had spilled nearly all his secrets. He'd spent a decade in the military before going into private-sector security. He had never been married and had no children. He'd come close to getting engaged once, he'd lived all over the world, but didn't call any place home and had put off finding a house or an apartment in Fool's Gold, preferring to live in a hotel until the business was up and running.

Patience had simply settled in to listen. Her mother's gentle grilling had been better than live theater and she'd been able to enjoy both the floor show and the view.

Since their earlier encounter in the salon where she worked, Justice had traded in his suit for jeans and a long-sleeved shirt. She liked the way he'd filled out—all muscles and strength. No doubt a result of excellent physical conditioning. She would suspect that the bodyguard business required that sort of thing.

Watching him talk, she noticed the odd line or two around his eyes and that his expression was more guarded than she remembered. She was also very conscious of the fact that the last man to walk into their house had been a plumber and before that, the guy who had upgraded their cable TV. Ava hadn't dated much after her husband had left. Patience hadn't meant to follow in her mother's footsteps on that front, yet here she was, pushing thirty and chronically single.

Justice was the kind of man to set the most chaste of hearts to fluttering, and Patience had to admit that any chastity on her part had been due to circumstance, not choice. If her handsome, slightly dangerous former childhood crush made a move, she would cheerfully agree. Justice seemed like the type of man to cure nearly any female ill. As long as she was careful to keep things emotionally casual.

She supposed that in today's modern age, she should be willing to make the first move herself. To self-actualize. But that wasn't her style. She'd never been especially brave and now, walking Justice out onto the front porch, she didn't experience any sudden surge in courage.

"Still adore my mother?" she asked as she closed the door behind them. Just in case he had the idea he should kiss her good-night. Which he should. She was doing her best to send that message telepathically. Not that she had any psychic talent.

Justice sat on the porch railing and nodded. "She's good. I'm going to talk to Ford and Angel about hiring her to teach the interrogation classes."

Patience smiled. "It's a gift and she uses it. I think people believe that I was a pretty decent kid naturally, but that's not true at all. It's because I knew my mother could make me confess if she suspected I'd done anything wrong." She leaned against the upright support and smiled. "It helps keep Lillie in line, too."

Justice grinned. "Lillie's great. You're lucky to have her."

"I agree."

His smile faded. “Can I ask about her dad?”

“You can, and I’ll even answer.” She shrugged. “Ned and I got married because I got pregnant. I was young and stupid.”

“Lillie’s ten?”

“Uh-huh. I’ll do the math for you. I was nineteen when she was born. Ned was a guy I was dating. I was bored and confused about my life, and one thing led to another. I got pregnant, he did the right thing and we were married. Six months later, he ran off with a fortysomething redhead who had more money than sense. Lillie was three weeks old.”

Justice’s expression hardened. “Does he pay his child support?”

She allowed herself the brief illusion of believing that Justice would rush to take care of Ned if he didn’t. The fantasy was very satisfying.

“He doesn’t have to. He signed away all rights in return for not having to support her financially. I think I got the better deal. He wouldn’t have been consistent, and that would have hurt Lillie.”

“You could have used the money.”

“Maybe, but we get by. I’ll never be able to save enough to open Brew-haha, but I can live with that.”

He straightened. “What?”

She laughed. “Brew-haha. It’s what I would call my coffee place. I’ve actually designed the logo. It’s a coffee cup with little hearts on it. Brew-haha, Ooh, la-la is the part in writing.”

His mouth twitched.

She put her hands on her hips. “Excuse me, but are you making fun of my business?”

“Not me.”

“You think the name is silly.”

“I think it’s perfect.”

“I’m not sure I believe you.” She glared at him. “I’m playing the lottery most weeks, and when I win, you’re going to see just how great the name is.”

“I hope that happens.”

Maybe it was her imagination, but she would swear Justice was moving closer to her. His dark blue gaze locked with hers. The night got quiet and she suddenly found it difficult to breathe.

Kiss me, she thought as loudly as she could.

He didn’t. He just stared at her, which made her nervous. And being nervous made her talk.

“It’s great to have you back,” she mumbled. “Here in Fool’s Gold.”

Ack! Really? As opposed to just in the state or country?

“I’m glad to be back,” he told her. “Your friendship meant a lot to me.”

“It meant a lot to me, too.”

He moved closer and closer...and stood up.

“I should head back to the hotel,” he said, stepping to the side and starting down the stairs. “Thanks for dinner.”

Patience watched him go. She supposed some socially correct response was called for, but all she could think was Justice Garrett owed her a kiss and she was going to find a way to collect.

\* \* \*

THE NEXT EVENING Patience climbed the stairs to the house. It was her day to work late, so it was already close to seven. Her mom took care of Lillie’s dinner and helped with any homework, which made the later shift easier. She knew that she was lucky—a lot of single moms didn’t have the built-in support she did.

She opened the front door and was about to call out she was home when she saw her mother talking on the phone. Ava looked intense and concerned, neither of which was good. Patience dropped her purse onto the table by the door, then headed up the stairs to her daughter’s room.

Lillie was curled up on her bed, reading.

“Hey, baby girl,” Patience said as she walked over and sat on the mattress.

“Mom!” Lillie dropped the book and lunged forward for a hug. “You’re home.”

“I am. How was your day?”

“Good. My math test was easy. We’re watching a video on gorillas tomorrow and we had tacos for dinner.”

Patience kissed her daughter’s forehead, then stared into her eyes. “I noticed you slipped in that bit about the math test.”

Lillie grinned. “If I study, the tests are easier than if I don’t.”

“Uh-huh. Which means I was...”

“Right.” Her daughter grumbled. “You were right.”

Patience squeezed her. “That never gets old.”

“You love being right.”

“I love it more when you say it.” Patience glanced toward the stairs. “Do you know who Grandma’s talking to?”

“No.”

Patience supposed she would get the story when her mother hung up. “I’m going to make a salad. Do you want anything?”

“No, thanks.” Lillie picked up her book.

Patience went back downstairs and into the kitchen. She could hear her mother’s voice, but not the conversation. She opened the refrigerator and pulled out leftover taco meat. By the time her mother had hung up, she’d assembled a salad and was carrying it to the table.

“Sorry,” Ava said as she walked into the kitchen. “That was my cousin, Margaret.” She took the chair across from her daughter.

Patience took a bite of her salad and chewed. “She lives in Illinois, right?” she asked when she’d swallowed.

Her mother had some family in the Midwest. Patience vaguely remembered a few of them visiting when she’d been little, but there hadn’t been much contact in years. There were the obligatory cards and letters at the holidays and not much else.

“Yes. Margaret and her mother, who is my step-aunt. It’s complicated.” Ava paused.

Patience watched her, aware that something had happened. Ava was flushed. She shifted in her seat and couldn’t keep her hands still.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” Her mother started to smile, then shook her head. She half rose, then collapsed back in the chair. “Great-Aunt Becky died.”

“Who?”

“Great-Aunt Becky. My step-aunt’s mother. She’s not technically a relative—at least I don’t think so. She and I wrote the occasional letter. You met her once. You were four.”

“Okay.” Patience put down her fork. “I’m sorry she died. Are you upset?”

“I’m sad, of course. But like you, I only met her a few times. She visited us when you were little.” Her mother smiled. “You took to her. From the second you first met her, you couldn’t stand to be away from her. You wanted her to hold you. You wanted to be on her lap. When she got up, you followed her from room to room. It was very sweet.”

“Or annoying, if Great-Aunt Becky wasn’t into kids.”

Ava laughed. “As it turned out, she was as charmed by you as you were by her. She extended her visit twice and you both cried when she left. She always meant to come back, but never made it.”

“I wish I could remember her.” Patience had vague recollections of a tall woman, but that could have been anyone. “Do you want me to send a card?”

“If you’d like. The thing is, Great-Aunt Becky left you some money. An inheritance.”

“Oh.” That was unexpected. “Didn’t she have children of her own?”

“One daughter. Great-Aunt Becky was very wealthy, so her immediate family is taken care of. You don’t have to worry.” Ava leaned forward and took Patience’s hands in hers. “She left you a hundred thousand dollars.”

Patience stared at her mother. She heard a rushing in her ears and if she’d been standing, she would have surely fallen to the floor. The space-time continuum seemed to shift just a little to the left.

“A hundred...”

“Thousand dollars,” her mother said. “You heard that right.”

The number was too big. No. It was too huge. Impossible to grasp. That was all the money in the world.

“Margaret wanted to let me know that the lawyer in charge of Great-Aunt Becky’s estate will be calling you in the morning. He has the check written and ready to overnight to you.”

Patience pulled one hand free to press it to her chest. “I don’t think I can breathe.”

“I know.”

“We can pay off the mortgage.”

“I don’t want you to worry about that.”

Patience shook her head. “Mom, you’ve been there for me all my life. I want to pay off the mortgage. Then I’ll fund Lillie’s college account.” She bit her lower lip.

Even after all that, there would still be money left over. Maybe as much as twenty-five thousand dollars. Assuming she put some away for a rainy day, there was still enough to...to...

Ava nodded. “I know. I thought of that, too.”

“The coffeehouse.”

“Yes. We could do it.”

Patience sprang to her feet and raced upstairs. When she reached her bedroom, she pulled open the bottom drawer of the small desk under the window and removed a file. It was her business plan—the one she’d been working on for years.

She returned to the kitchen and spread out the papers.

Everything was there. The cost of the lease, money for minor renovations, equipment, supplies and some promotions. There were cost projections, income estimates and a profit-and-loss statement.

“We could do it,” she breathed. “It would be tight.”

“I have some money I’ve saved,” Ava told her. “I’d want to invest in the business. That way we’re really partners.”

“We’re partners no matter what.”

“I want to do this, Patience. I want you to open the business and I want to help.”

Patience returned to her seat. “I’m terrified. I’d have to quit my job with Julia to do this.” Which meant giving up the security of a regular paycheck. She would also have to take on the lease and hire people.

Her stomach churned. Somehow dreaming was a whole lot easier than facing the possibility of trying and failing. Yet even as she wondered if she could, she knew there wasn’t really a choice. She’d been given a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Great-Aunt Becky’s gift deserved more than her being afraid.

“You want to do this?” she asked.

“Absolutely.”

“Then we will.” She drew in a breath. “I’ll call Josh about the building I have my eye on and get an appointment to see it as soon as possible. Once we figure out if that’s the right space, we can move forward.”

She stood and her mother did the same. They faced each other.

“We’re really doing this,” Patience said, laughing.

“We are!”

They hugged each other and started jumping up and down. Lillie appeared on the stairs.

“What’s going on?”

“We’re opening the coffeehouse,” Patience said, holding out her arm so her daughter could join them.

“Really? Are you going to call it Brew-haha?”

“I am.”

“Can I help?”

“Yes.”

They hugged and jumped and screamed and danced. When they were all exhausted but still grinning, Ava motioned for them to follow her.

“This calls for ice cream,” she said. “Let’s all go get hot fudge sundaes.”

Patience laughed. “I’ve always admired your style, Mom.”

\* \* \*

“JUSTICE?”

Justice turned at the sound of his name. Patience stood on the other side of the street, waving at him.

The sight of her—worn jeans hugging curves, a T-shirt featuring a white cat with a martini in one paw, long, wavy hair fluttering in the light breeze—hit him in the gut. And lower. Her smile made his mouth curve up, and her enthusiastic wave drew him.

In the fifteen years they’d been apart, he’d never forgotten her, even as he’d wondered if he was remembering more than there was. Now, watching her practically dance in place as he crossed the street to get closer, he knew he’d missed out on the main point. Patience in real life was far more vibrant than any of his recollections.

“Guess what?” she asked as he stepped onto the curb. She grabbed his arm and literally bounced in place. “Guess! Guess!” She squeezed his biceps and grinned. “You’ll never guess, so I’ll tell you.”

Her brown eyes glowed with excitement and her skin was flushed. She looked like someone who had just won the lottery. Or been thoroughly kissed. He found himself fervently hoping for the former and thinking he would have to have a serious talk with someone if it was the latter.

“My great-aunt Becky died!”

“And that’s a good thing?”

“Oh.” The bounce slowed. “You’re right. Of course I’m not happy she’s dead. It’s sad. Apparently she lived a long and happy life, though.”

“You didn’t know her?”

“I met her when I was four. I don’t remember, but apparently I liked her a lot. She liked me, too, and was a fabulously generous woman.” She paused expectantly. “She left me a hundred thousand dollars!”

He smiled. “So that’s what all this is about?”

She started bouncing again. “Can you believe it? A hundred thousand dollars! That’s so much money. My mom and I were talking last night. I can pay off the mortgage and put money aside for Lillie’s college.”

She leaned toward him, the scent of vanilla and something floral drifting to him. “I’m a hairstylist. I love my customers, but some of the guys tip me fifty cents. There was no way I could have saved for Lillie’s college. My mom does well as a software programmer, but her medical insurance is hugely expensive. Some of her medications aren’t covered. She helps, but she has to take care of herself. This money means security for us. I never thought I’d have that.”

Patience released him and spun in a circle. “But you know the best part?”

He shook his head, grateful he didn’t have to speak. Because with her dancing around him, he found his brain wasn’t actually in working order. And other parts of him were starting to take over. Need began to pulse in rhythm with his heart, and had they been anywhere but on a public corner

in the middle of Fool's Gold, he would have pulled her close and kissed her. Then he would have done a whole lot more.

"There's going to be money left over."

It took him a second to catch up. "From the inheritance?"

She nodded vigorously. "Look."

She pointed across the street to a vacant storefront. "Isn't it perfect?"

The building wasn't all that remarkable. A door, windows and space inside. But he knew that wasn't the point. To Patience, this was her dream.

Justice was also going to open a business. It seemed the next logical step. He was sure it would be successful and that he would enjoy the work, but it wasn't a dream. He didn't allow that much wanting in his life.

"It's perfect," he told her, enjoying the way she gazed at the building—as if it were magical.

"I know exactly how it's going to look," she told him. "I already have my business plan. I worked so hard to get my plans together and to save, but honestly I never thought I had a chance."

He reached out and squeezed her hand. "I'm really happy for you. Congratulations."

"Thank you." She laced her fingers with his. "Come with me. I'm meeting Eddie right now. She's going to let me in so I can check out the space."

Her sparkling brown eyes compelled him to agree. "Sure."

She drew in a breath and leaned into him. "I'll try not to make high-pitched girlie sounds. I live with a ten-year-old and know how shrill they can be."

"You can squeal all you want. This is exciting."

"I know."

She hung on to his hand with both of hers. He would guess that if he pointed out what she was doing, she would pull back and be embarrassed, which he didn't want. Her enthusiasm reminded him there was plenty of joy left in the world, and that was a lesson he needed.

She tugged him along as she crossed the street. "Obviously the location is fabulous," she said, practically vibrating with enthusiasm. "Look. We're right across from the park and on the parade route. That means we're easy access for tourists and locals. I'd love to be closer to Morgan's Books, but he's just around the corner from you-know-where."

Justice stepped up on the sidewalk. He was familiar with "you-know-who" from the times he'd been guarding families with Harry Potter—reading kids, but this was a new one.

"You-know-where?"

Patience glanced around, as if making sure no one was nearby and listening. "The other coffee place," she said in a whisper. "I love them and I sort of feel guilty about what I'm doing."

"The other coffee... You mean Starbucks?"

"Shhh." She waved her free hand at him. "Don't say it."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. I don't want to hurt their feelings."

"You think the store is sad about this?" He gentled his tone. "You know they're a multibillion-dollar corporation. They'll be fine."

She paused for a second, then nodded. "Good point. I'll let my guilt go." She touched one of the bare windows. "What do you think?"

"It's very nice."

She laughed. "I know. It's an empty store, right? But there's so much more here. Once Eddie lets me in, I'll show you."

"Eddie?"

Before Patience could fill in the details, an older woman rounded the corner. She had to be in her seventies, with white, short, curly hair. She wore a brightly colored velour tracksuit and athletic shoes.

“I’m glad you didn’t keep me waiting,” she said as she pulled keys out of her large handbag and started fitting them into the lock. “I have to help Josh with interviews. That man can’t keep staff. He’s forever talking about dreams and doing what matters. Then the staff gets bugs up their butts about joining the peace corps or working for a nonprofit. Sure, they’re saving the world, but I have to train the new people.”

She paused and eyed him. “We haven’t met.”

“Justice Garrett,” he said, stepping away from Patience and holding out his hand.

She fluttered her lashes at him. “Eddie Carberry. You’re very handsome.”

“Thank you.”

“Single?”

Before he could process the question—the woman couldn’t mean what he thought she meant—Patience stepped between them.

“Sorry, Eddie, he’s with me.”

Eddie sighed. “The good ones are all taken.” She turned the lock and opened the door to the business.

“Take your time looking around. I’m going back to the office. Just give me a call when you’re finished. I’ll come back over and lock up.” She glanced back at him. “If you change your mind…”

He cleared his throat. “It was nice to meet you, ma’am.”

She lightly touched his arm. “Call me Eddie.” She turned back to Patience. “Josh wants you to have the place. He’ll give you a good deal on the lease. You know how he supports new businesses in town. He’s such a softie, it’s something of a miracle he got as rich as he did.” She leaned into Patience. “Did you check out his—”

“Yes,” Patience whispered back, cutting her off. “You should probably get back to the office.”

“I should. Call me when you’re done.”

“I will.”

Justice watched the old lady leave. There weren’t many circumstances when he felt uncomfortable, but this was one of them.

“Was she trying—”

“To suggest she’d like to have her way with you?” Patience asked, her eyes bright with amusement. “Oh yeah. Eddie and her friend Gladys consider themselves connoisseurs of handsome men. Especially unfamiliar handsome men. So if you’re interested, let me know and I’ll get you her number.”

“Very funny.”

She grinned. “I acted without thinking before. You know, when I said we were together. Because I can let her know we’re just friends. Eddie’s really sweet. She’s worked for Josh for years.”

He figured the unknown man was a safer topic. “Josh?”

“Josh Golden. He’s a former cyclist. Very famous.”

“I’ve heard of him. He won the Tour de France a few times.”

“Among other races. He’s a great guy, lives here in town.”

Suddenly Justice found himself disliking the other man. “You know him?”

“Everyone does. He’s a big part of the community. He got married about three years ago. He and Charity just had their second child a couple of months ago. A boy.” She turned to face the open space. “This is it. What do you think?”

He turned his attention to the store. The main room was maybe fifteen hundred square feet. He would guess there was a bit more in the back, for storage. Floor-to-ceiling bookshelves dominated one wall. Big windows let in plenty of light.

“I love the flooring,” Patience said, pointing to the hardwood covering. “It’s in great shape. I wouldn’t change that. Obviously the bookshelf stays. I thought about having doors put on the bottom for storage.”

“You’ll need to change locks.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Probably.” She crossed to the back of the store. “This wall is where the magic happens. We’ll have a long, wide counter, with three sets of sinks. The dishwasher goes in the back.”

She turned and walked forward three steps. “The main counter here. Pastry display, sandwiches, that sort of thing. Mom and I have picked out the most fabulous cold case.” She spread out her hands, as if demonstrating where it would all be.

“We’ve been looking online for months. We know what fixtures we want.” Her smile widened. “I spent the morning finding out what was in stock. It was so surreal. When I’m done here, I’m going to talk to a lawyer about the lease.”

She clapped her hands together and spun in a circle. “I can’t believe it. We’re going to do this. We’re going to open Brew-haha.”

Her whole body personified happiness. Her hair swung as she moved, her eyes drifted closed. She was completely in the moment, excited, hopeful and sexy as hell.

When the side of her foot hit an open box, she staggered a little. Justice instinctively reached to steady her. The second his fingers closed around her arm, he knew he was lost and there was only one way to be found.

#### CHAPTER FOUR

PATIENCE OPENED HER eyes as she tried to regain her balance. Warm, strong arms came around her. Justice pulled her so close she had no choice but to settle against him. One second she was in danger of falling, and the next she was staring up into his dark blue eyes. Her head was still spinning, but this time for a very different reason.

She rested her hands on his shoulders because it seemed the most sensible place for them to be. She saw sunlight streaming through the bare windows and tiny dust motes floating in the air. Felt her heart beating too quickly and the intensity of Justice’s gaze.

Then he was lowering his head. She had only a second to catch her breath before his mouth brushed against hers.

His lips were firm. Not unyielding, exactly, but determined. He was taking charge, and under the circumstances, she was good with that. She’d had enough responsibility in her life, thank you very much.

He moved his mouth slowly, gently, exploring, testing, as if he enjoyed what he was doing. She sank into him, giving herself up to the delicious pressure.

She hadn’t been kissed by a man in a long time. Years, actually. She’d nearly forgotten the thrill of the closeness, the quivering in her belly, the hint that there could be more and that the more could take her breath away.

She was aware of the smoothness of his shirt beneath her fingers, and the honed muscles under that. Of the way he was so much taller and broader and how she could picture herself leaning on him in more ways than this.

Then his mouth moved a little more—back and forth, as if he was figuring out how it all was going to be. The first tingles began deep inside her, and thinking became more difficult. She could only feel. Feel his hands on her waist, his mouth on hers. Feel the rapid beating of her heart and the way her blood seemed to race faster and faster.

He moved, kissing first one cheek, then the other. He kissed her nose and her chin before returning his attention to her mouth. She wasn’t sure if he asked or she offered, but suddenly she parted her lips and he swept his tongue inside.

With the first stroke, she had to hold in a whimper. On the second, her knees went weak. With the third, she wanted to beg. Her wanting wasn’t subtle. It exploded in her breasts, then went about sixty miles an hour to the very center of her. She got so aroused so fast she started to ache.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and silently urged him to take inappropriate advantage of her. Seriously, didn't he want to put his hands on her breasts or maybe between her thighs? The idea of him pushing her up against the wall while he had his way with her caused her to shudder. The image was so clear she began breathing harder.

Now, she thought almost frantically. He should make his move now.

He drew back and gave her a faint smile. "I should probably let you get to it."

She had no idea what he was talking about. It? What it?

Justice cleared his throat. "You have a lot to do."

He took another step back and headed for the door. Before she could figure out what was happening, he was gone. Just like that. A couple of hot kisses and he was out the door.

Patience had a feeling she looked as shocked as she felt. How could he have left like that? He'd kissed her. Passionately. Didn't he want to do something else? Something more? Something that required them getting naked and sweaty?

As she was standing alone in the empty store, she would have to say the answer to the question was obviously no.

Disappointment replaced excitement. Reality intruded. Justice was one hot guy. He had been when they were kids, and that hadn't changed today. She'd liked him then and she still liked him. Which made her vulnerable.

While she couldn't blame him for being whisked out of her life all those years ago, he'd done nothing to get in touch with her since then. He'd managed to find Ford, but not her. She could come up with a hundred reasons to explain his actions, but she couldn't avoid the truth. If he'd wanted to see her earlier, he would have. So he hadn't wanted to.

He was back now and more tempting than should be legal. But tempting wasn't safe. She wasn't that fourteen-year-old girl anymore. She was a single mom with an impressionable daughter. She knew how caring about Justice could break tender hearts. She had to be strong and resist. For her sake, but also for Lillie's.

\* \* \*

JUSTICE STOOD IN the center of the old warehouse on the edge of town. The building was a whole lot less fancy than the place he'd seen the previous day with Patience. The floors were concrete, there weren't any walls or windows and the ductwork was exposed. But the building had been built to last and was well insulated. Putting up walls would be easy. If they added some windows, set aside half the building for various workout rooms, it could work. There was land outside, as well. Enough for target practice and an obstacle course. The location was good and the price better. If they picked this building, he would have to find a place in the mountains for a more advanced obstacle course, but that would be easy.

He walked around, the only light coming from the overhead fluorescents and the open double doors where he'd entered. He knew he didn't have Patience's enthusiasm for his new business, but that was okay. He didn't like emotional highs or lows. He'd learned a long time ago to accept things as they happened and keep moving forward.

He, too, had a business plan, along with the cash to make it happen. His friend Felicia had emailed him that morning, asking if he'd made up his mind. If he had settled on Fool's Gold, he needed to let her know. If he hadn't, it was time to go look somewhere else. After all, this wasn't just about himself. He had business partners who wanted him to make a decision.

As far as Felicia was concerned, she would go anywhere normal. Small-town America appealed to her, and Fool's Gold fit the definition. She would be there to set up the business, and if she ended up hating Fool's Gold, she would move on. But the others would be stuck.

Ford Hendrix had also emailed two days ago to tell Justice to pick Fool's Gold already, and yesterday to say anywhere but there. Ford's ambivalence came from his close-knit family. There were

days the former SEAL wanted to reconnect and others when he needed to head into some wilderness and never be heard from again. It was the kind of ambivalence Justice could relate to. With Patience...

He shook his head. He wasn't here to think about her.

His third partner, Angel, fell into the neutral category. He'd never been to the town. When he'd read the description, he'd been intrigued by the nearby mountains. Angel enjoyed the outdoors and getting away from the world. The rugged topography offered plenty of both. So the decision fell to Justice, who, honest to God, didn't have a clue.

Except he did. There was a part of him that had always wanted to come back here. To the one place he'd felt welcome.

Patience was a big part of the pull, he admitted, if only to himself. He'd never forgotten about her and had often wondered where she was and what she was doing. With his resources, it would have been easy to find out. He could have had a complete dossier on her in less than six hours. Only he never had.

Now he knew she was in town and single, which made her a temptation. Their kiss the previous morning had only fueled the fantasy. He wanted more. He wanted her in his bed, pulling him close, taking him with as much passion as he wanted to take her.

Which meant the best solution for both of them was for him to walk away.

He knew who he was and the type of man he could become. Patience deserved better. He wanted to think he could be better, do better, than his father. That Bart Hanson's DNA wasn't his son's destiny. But he couldn't be sure. When his father had finally been captured and sent back to prison, Justice had been free to choose. He could have been anything, gone anywhere. The fact that he'd joined the army wasn't noteworthy. His choice of occupation was.

He'd become a sniper. Not a cop, not a technician. The son of a murderer had chosen to kill others. It was the ultimate proof of the darkness in his soul. Which meant leaving made the most sense for Patience and her family. They deserved better than him. The problem was he didn't want to go. And that made him the biggest bastard of all.

He heard footsteps on the concrete and turned to see a well-dressed older woman walking into the warehouse. Like Eddie from the day before, she had white hair. But the similarities ended there. This woman had on a well-tailored suit, pumps and pearls. She smiled as she approached and held out her hand.

"Welcome back, Justice Garrett. I'm Mayor Marsha Tilson. You probably don't remember me."

"No, I don't. But it's nice to meet you, again."

They shook hands.

The mayor studied him. "You've grown up. I remember when you were a tall, skinny teenager. You were friends with Patience McGraw and Ford Hendrix. It was always the three of you, but I thought you had special feelings for Patience."

He stared at the older woman. She was talking about relationships that had played out fifteen years ago. While the events had been important to him, he couldn't imagine a woman in her fifties paying attention to the lives of a group of teenagers.

Her smile widened. "I can see my observations are startling. I confess I was intrigued by you from the very beginning. Your guardians did an excellent job of fitting in, but there were inconsistencies in their story. When you first arrived, it was obvious you'd suffered some kind of trauma."

"You knew I was being protected?"

"No. I never figured that out. I thought maybe the man who claimed to be your uncle wasn't a relative and that you didn't want anyone to know. There could be many reasons for the subterfuge. So I watched to make sure you weren't being abused, and when you began to settle in and make friends, I knew all would be well."

He shifted slightly, uncomfortable with the idea that she'd been watching out for him. "I was fine."

"Until you had to leave so mysteriously. We were all worried. Patience especially. Under the circumstances, you had to go. We see that now. But at the time, we were concerned."

Obviously the mayor knew the story of what had happened. He shouldn't be surprised. News traveled fast in a town this small.

"Now you're here to open a business. Some kind of bodyguard school, I hear?"

He chuckled. "Is that what they're saying?"

She laughed. "It is, although I'll admit I had my doubts about that. What's the real story?"

"The business will provide advanced security training of all kinds."

"Not for your average mall cop?"

"No. We're interested in the security forces who travel to the dangerous parts of the world. We'll cover basic evasion techniques, hand-to-hand combat, along with weapons expertise. In addition, we'll train security forces to understand the safest way to travel to and through the trouble spots. Most of that is about planning."

They were also going to be offering workshops on dealing with local terrorists and hostage negotiations, but he doubted the mayor wanted to know the details about that.

"We'll also be providing corporate retreats," he added. "A facility where they can practice their team building."

She nodded. "A nice steady source of income." She paused. "Has Ford decided if he's willing to move back to Fool's Gold?"

Justice stared at her. How in hell did she know what Ford was thinking? "Not yet."

She nodded. "He's been gone a long time. The transition to civilian life is bound to be difficult for any soldier. But with what Ford has seen..." She sighed. "He has family here, which he probably considers both a blessing and a curse. I can't help thinking he'll need their support. There are other considerations, as well. What about Mr. Whittaker?"

"You know about Angel?"

"I've heard a few things. We haven't yet met, although I'm looking forward to that."

She moved toward the doorway. He found himself following, although he couldn't say why.

"You'll have some kind of physical-fitness facility?" she asked.

"Yes. And an outdoor obstacle course."

"You're very close to Josh Golden's cycling school." She handed him a business card. "You might want to speak to him about using the facilities. Cycling provides overall conditioning."

He took the card. "You came prepared."

"I'm always prepared, Justice. This is my town and I take care of my citizens."

He got the message and braced himself for the warning. He told himself she was just an old lady who made smart guesses, but he didn't believe it. She knew things and that meant she could easily have figured out his issues. She was going to warn him off, and he couldn't blame her for that.

"You'll find the city is very supportive of your venture. If you need anything, contact me directly and I'll get you in touch with the right person. You belong here, Justice—I have a feeling about that."

He'd been captured once. On a mission. Held and beaten for a few hours. He'd barely begun to prepare himself for the ordeal when his team had broken in and rescued him. He'd been as shocked by their arrival then as he was by the mayor's words now.

"You'll want to provide some community outreach," she continued. "Maybe self-defense classes, something for children. You'll be welcome in the community regardless, but it's nice to give back. You'll feel better about yourself, and the transition will be easier for all your staff."

She smiled again. "I doubt your employees are just regular folks, are they?"

"Not really."

“I thought not. They’ll need to find their footing, as well. Some of them will believe that’s not possible. You and I know otherwise. It’s up to us to show them what Fool’s Gold has to offer.”

“I hadn’t thought of classes for the community,” he admitted.

“That’s why I’m here. To offer possibilities.” She lightly touched his arm. “Welcome home, Justice. I’m glad you found your way.”

He wanted to tell her he wasn’t sure he was staying, but even as he thought the words, he knew they weren’t true. He had decided the second he’d returned. Seeing Patience had sealed the deal. He might not be able to have what he wanted with her, but he couldn’t seem to walk away, either. An uncomfortable dilemma.

Mayor Tilson wished him the best and walked out of the warehouse. Justice reached into his pocket and pulled out his cell phone.

“Is it Fool’s Gold?” Felicia asked by way of greeting.

“It is.”

“Great. It’s going to take me a couple of weeks to wrap everything up. Maybe three. I’ll let you know when I’m on my way. In the meantime I’ll notify Ford and Angel and get going on the plan. Send me pictures of the building and the outlying area. I’ll coordinate with the lawyer on the purchase and investigate leasing options, as well.”

Felicia wasn’t one for pleasantries. She got right to the problem and in a matter of seconds, had sixteen solutions. She could list them in order of success ratio, danger or cost. She was the smartest person he knew, and probably one of the ten most intelligent people in the world. At times that made her challenging to work with, but she was never boring.

“How are you?” he asked, mostly to mess with her.

She sighed. “Really? We have to do that every time we speak?” There was a pause. “I’m fine, Justice. Thank you so much for asking. How are you enjoying Fool’s Gold?”

“It’s very nice.” He grinned. “Are you calculating how much work you could have gotten done if we hadn’t wasted time on that exchange?”

“No. I’m trying to be more social. I’m going to be living in a small town and I want to be like everyone else.”

He didn’t have the heart to tell her that would never happen. She was many things, but “just like everyone else” wasn’t one of them.

“Did you see her?” Felicia asked. “Your friend?”

He’d told her a little about Patience—that they’d known each other back in high school. But not that she’d haunted him and that the memories of her had kept him anchored and strong.

“I have.”

“Is she how you remember?”

He thought about the feel of her in his arms. How she’d kissed. He remembered her laughter and her spinning in the middle of an empty storefront.

“She’s better.”

\* \* \*

JULIA HELD OUT her arms. “Congratulations, Patience. This is everything you’ve wanted.”

Patience hugged her boss. “I know. I’m so excited.” She’d gotten the lease from Josh and had taken it over to an attorney that morning for a quick review. The next order of business was telling the woman she worked for that she would be leaving.

“What’s your time frame?” Julia asked, releasing her.

“Six weeks,” Patience said. “Maybe eight. I thought I could work part-time for a while, if that’s okay with you.” She held up her hands. “I feel like I’m leaving you in a lurch.”

“You are, but so what? This is like winning the lotto. You can’t turn your back on opportunity. We’ll talk about who would do best with each of your clients. After we do that, you can call all your

regulars and let them know what's happening." Julia's good humor faded slightly. "Just don't let them go over to Bella's place."

"Yes, ma'am," Patience murmured, eager to avoid that particular conversation.

Bella and Julia were sisters. Estranged sisters. They owned competing salons in town, which required the good citizens of Fool's Gold to be careful if they wanted to keep the peace.

Patience promised to contact her clients within a couple of days and left the office. She'd come in on her day off to tell Julia what had happened. Now she had a thousand things to do and no idea of where to start.

As promised, Great-Aunt Becky's lawyer had sent the check overnight. The money was currently sitting in her checking account. Ava had already researched where to put the money for Lillie's college fund, and they would pay off the mortgage at the end of the week. Once the lease was signed, they would start ordering the equipment and talking to a contractor about remodeling the store.

Patience stepped into the salon, prepared to get her purse and move to the next item on her list. She was stopped by a tall blonde waiting by her station.

"Your mom said I'd find you here."

Patience saw her friend Isabel and laughed. "No way. When did you get back?"

"Yesterday."

They hugged.

"Did I know you were scheduled for a visit?" Patience asked, excited to see her friend.

"No. It was kind of unexpected."

Isabel lived in New York and worked in marketing. Like Patience, she'd grown up in Fool's Gold and still had family here.

Patience glanced at the clock on the wall. It was nearly eleven-thirty. "Want to get an early lunch and catch up?"

"I was hoping you were going to say that," Isabel admitted. "I have so much to tell you."

"I can't wait to hear it."

They took the short walk to Margaritaville and were shown to a quiet booth by the window. After ordering diet soda and guacamole, they pushed aside the menus and looked at each other.

"You first," Patience said.

Isabel tucked her long blond hair behind her ear and shrugged. "I'm not sure where to start."

Patience had known the other woman all her life. Isabel was a couple of years younger, so they'd never hung out in school, but shortly after Ned had walked out on Patience, leaving her with a newborn, Isabel had flunked out of UCLA and returned to Fool's Gold. They liked to joke that their moments of disgrace had brought them together. They'd been friends ever since.

"Before I tell you my sad tale," Isabel said, "I want to see pictures."

Patience laughed and handed over her phone. Isabel flipped through the photos. "She's getting bigger by the minute. She's so pretty. Tell Lillie I can't wait to see her."

"I will."

Isabel passed the phone back. Their server appeared with drinks, chips, salsa and guacamole. Isabel waited until they were alone to put her left hand on the table and wiggle her fingers.

"I'm getting a divorce."

Patience stared at the bare ring finger. "No. What happened?"

"Nothing dramatic," Isabel said, her wide blue eyes filled with sadness, but no tears. "Eric and I are still friends, which is pretty sad. I think the truth is we were always friends. We got along so well we wanted to believe friendship was enough, but it wasn't."

"I'm sorry," Patience said, studying the other woman. There was more, she thought. Something Isabel wasn't telling her. Not that she was going to push. When her friend was ready, she would get to it.

“Me, too. I feel stupid and lost. My parents have been married something like a hundred and fifty years.” She gave a rueful smile. “Okay, more like thirty-five, but still. Maeve has been married twelve years and keeps popping out babies. I’m the family failure.”

Patience pushed the guacamole toward her. “Is that why you’re visiting? Because of the divorce?”

“Some of it. My parents have decided it’s time for them to follow their dreams. Maeve and I are grown and they don’t want to wait until they’re too old to travel. So they took their ‘rainy day’ fund and bought themselves tickets on a cruise around the world.”

“You’re kidding?”

“No. They leave in a couple of weeks. They also want to sell Paper Moon.”

Patience stared at her, a chip raised halfway to her mouth. “No way.” Paper Moon was the local bridal shop in town. It was an institution. Isabel’s great-grandmother had opened the store.

“I know,” Isabel said. “I was shocked, too. But my mom is tired of running it and Maeve isn’t interested. She has too many babies even if she was.”

“I can’t picture the square without Paper Moon Wedding Gowns.”

“It will still be there. I’m sure we’ll find a buyer.”

“But it won’t be the same.”

Isabel glanced out the window. “Everything changes, even when we don’t want it to.” She grabbed a chip. “Anyway, that’s why I’m back. I’m going to work in the store for the next eight months and get it ready to sell. In return I get a cut of the sales price. Good news for me because I’m going to need the money.”

She leaned forward, her expression more animated. “I have a friend in New York. Sonia. She’s a brilliant designer. We’re going to go into business together. Working in my folks’ store for a few months will give me the retail experience I’ll need and some extra cash for start-up costs.”

“You sound excited.”

“I am. My plans mean I can stand living here for a little while.”

“It’s not so bad here. You’ll do fine,” Patience told her.

“I can’t believe you never left.”

“I didn’t want to. I like the town.”

“I do, too, but come on. There’s a whole world out there.”

Patience knew that was true, but she’d never been all that interested in it.

The server returned and they placed their orders. When she was gone, Isabel looked at her friend. “So, I’ve done all the talking. What’s new with you?”

“For once, I have actual news.” Patience told her about Great-Aunt Becky and the money and the coffeehouse she and her mom were going to open.

Isabel laughed. “That’s fantastic.” She raised her glass of diet soda. “To all your dreams coming true.”

They clinked glasses.

“I’m terrified,” Patience admitted. “I don’t know anything about retail. I’ve taken some classes, but it’s not the same.”

“I know what you mean. I worked in the bridal shop when I was in high school and college, but that was just for the money. I wasn’t paying attention to how things were run. If I don’t do well, we can’t sell it for as much and there goes my nest egg.”

“We’ll be learning together,” Patience said.

“I like the sound of that. We’ll support each other.” Isabel picked up another chip. “Have you heard anything about Ford Hendrix lately?”

The question was casual enough. To someone who didn’t know Isabel’s past, it would be seen as a thoughtful inquiry. But Patience did know her friend’s history. Instead of answering, she raised her eyebrows.

“Really?”

Isabel rolled her eyes. “Don’t look at me like that. I’m just curious.”

“Because you’re getting a divorce?”

“No. Of course not. I’m back and that’s making me think about the past.”

“And how he was your ‘one true love’?”

Isabel winced. “Please don’t say it like that. It makes me sound like a crazy stalker.”

“You were a fourteen-year-old with a crush. I’m not sure there’s a difference.” Patience grinned. “You were wild about him.”

“Like you’re one to talk. You had a serious thing for that guy who left. What was his name?”

“Justice.”

“Right. It was all so mysterious. Did you ever find out what happened to him?”

“Yes.”

“Really? When?”

“A few days ago. He’s back.”

Isabel glared at her. “You didn’t tell me? You let me go on and on about my boring life when you have that kind of news? Have you talked to him? What’s he like? Where did he go? Why is he here?”

Patience sipped her soda. “As unbelievable as it sounds, he was in the witness protection program.” She quickly outlined the details. “He was here last year as a bodyguard and decided he wanted to return. So he and a couple of other guys are opening a business. They’re calling it something different, but it’s basically a bodyguard school.”

“A dangerous man. Is he good-looking?”

Patience did her best not to blush. “Yes.”

“So you’ve seen him.”

“He, uh, came over to dinner the other night. You know, to see my mom and stuff.”

Isabel pressed her lips together. “It’s the ‘stuff’ that’s so interesting. You still like him.”

“No. Maybe.” She squirmed on her seat. “Okay, yes. I do. He’s that guy and now he’s all grown up and when I’m with him, I have trouble breathing.”

Something flickered in Isabel’s eyes, then faded away. “That’s an impressive description. And I’m sensing a but.”

Patience nodded. “But why now? While he was in the witness protection program, he couldn’t tell me who he was. Then his dad was captured and sent back to prison. Which meant Justice could do whatever he wanted. Obviously he didn’t want to get in touch with me.”

“Oh.” Isabel straightened. “That’s an excellent point.”

“He did find Ford. They’re friends. Now he’s back and my hormones are singing praises, but I’m telling myself I need to be careful.”

“Yeah, you do. Men aren’t always who they seem.” Isabel reached for another chip. “It’s never easy, is it?”

“No. I’m trying to be calm and adult about the whole thing.” She thought about the kiss and how it had left her weak in the knees. “If he’s opening a business, it’s not like he’s going to disappear again, right?” Because that’s what she couldn’t get past. Him leaving. Every man she’d ever cared about had left.

“It’s a very good sign.”

Patience drew in a breath. “I hope so. And while we’re on the subject of hope, I do have something to tell you about Ford.”

Isabel looked at her. “Which is?”

“He’s going to be here soon. Apparently he’s leaving the military and coming back to Fool’s Gold.”

Isabel opened her mouth, then closed it. “He’ll be in town?”

“That’s the rumor. I don’t have any details or dates.”

“Oh God. No. I can’t face him. I wrote him for years. Not that I’m sure he got my letters or if he did, if he read them, but still.”

“He would have liked your letters.”

“You can’t know that. He probably does think I’m a stalker.” She covered her face with her hands. “I knew coming home would be complicated, but I didn’t think I would have to face Ford.” She dropped her hands to the table. “Is he married?”

“I don’t know.”

“He’s probably married. With six kids, right? And a dog. So I don’t have to worry. He won’t even remember me.”

Patience reached for another chip. “I want to make fun of you, but I can’t, because I know exactly what you’re going through.”

“That makes me feel better. You’ll tell me if you learn anything?”

“Every detail.”

“I’ll do the same for you. Not that I’m expecting to be in the middle of gossip central. When people come to the bridal shop, they tend to be past the dramatic stage of their relationship.” She picked up her soda. “You really think Ford’s married?” She sounded both horrified and hopeful.

“He could be. And I’m sure he’s not nearly as good-looking as he was.”

“Right. He’s old now and uninteresting.” She paused. “You said Justice is hunky.”

Patience held in a sigh. “The hunkiest.”

“Good. One of us should get the great guy.”

“It’s too soon to know if he’s great or not,” Patience said. She wanted to believe he was, of course, but she had no actual evidence.

#### CHAPTER FIVE

“YOURS IS bigger than mine,” Patience said, walking around the warehouse.

Justice chuckled. No matter the circumstances, she could always make him laugh. “I thought women liked to say size doesn’t matter.”

She looked at him, blushed, then turned away. “I meant your business.”

“I know what you meant. I’m going to be doing different things here. We’ll need the space.”

She walked around the open area. “I guess the good news is you can do anything you want.”

“That’s what I thought. Frame in the walls, build some offices and meeting rooms.”

“A bathroom,” she added. “If your clients are going to be working out, you might want to think about showers.”

He did want to think about showers, but not in the way she meant.

He followed her as she walked around. She wore jeans and another of her decorated T-shirts. This one was pink with rhinestone flamingos sitting at a table, sipping martinis. He wasn’t sure what it meant, but it was pure Patience.

She turned to face him. “You’ve decided? You’re staying?”

He wondered if the truth was that since seeing her, leaving wasn’t an option. “I’m staying.”

“And you’re opening this business with your partners?”

“Ford and Angel.”

“Angel?”

“You haven’t met him yet.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Have you warned him what he’s getting into, coming to a town like this one?”

“He’ll be fine.”

She walked toward him. “You’ve obviously stayed in touch with Ford.”

He nodded, then wondered if her interest was personal rather than general. They’d all been friends together. Ford had spent years in town after he had left. Had they dated? Ford had never

said anything, but he didn't share all that much. Tension tightened the muscles across the back of his shoulders.

"You looking forward to seeing him?" Justice asked.

"Sure." She paused. "Is he married?"

He didn't like the question and liked the answer even less. "No. Is that good news?"

She smiled. "It's always fun when a hometown hero returns. I think his mother and sisters will be more excited." Her smile turned mischievous. "As for the married thing, you can't tell anyone, but my friend Isabel is totally freaked out about Ford coming back."

His muscles relaxed. "She had a thing for him?"

"Big-time. Ford was engaged to her sister. Maeve cheated on him with his best friend and Ford was understandably pissed. He took off and joined the army. Maeve married the best friend. They're still together. But Ford almost never comes back to visit. When he sees his family, he meets them somewhere else and not very often. Isabel was only fourteen when Ford left and she wrote him for years. Now they're all grown up and she's moved back to town. She's very nervous about seeing him again." Patience paused. "Is this too much information?"

"No. It's confusing, but not too much."

She looked around at the warehouse. "Are you scared?"

"About?"

"Starting a business. I'm terrified. If I think about it too much, I start to doubt myself." She looked back at him. "My dad took off when I was only a couple of years older than Lillie. He never bothered to stay in touch with me. After he left, it was my mom and me. Then I met Ned and that was a disaster. I was alone and I had Lillie, and my mom invited me back home."

She folded her arms across her chest. "She was always there for me. The inheritance will help pay the mortgage off. That's security for both of us. But I have Lillie, and if the coffee shop fails, I will have wasted all that money. Am I being irresponsible, taking on the risk?"

He moved toward her and put his hands on her shoulders. "No. You get to be happy, too."

"I'm happy working at Chez Julia."

"Is being a hairstylist your dream?"

"No, but..."

"Is Brew-haha?"

The corners of her mouth turned up. "Yes, but—"

"No buts. You get to have your dream, Patience. You've taken care of your mom's house and your daughter's college. You get to have a little something for yourself, too."

"Opening a business isn't a little thing."

"You deserve to have one of your dreams come true."

"What if I fail?"

Her eyes darkened as she said the words, and he knew she'd just spoken her greatest fear. But before he could tell her she wouldn't and list all the reasons why, someone spoke his name.

"There you are. You're a very difficult man to find."

Patience stepped back and he dropped his hands to his sides. The woman walking purposefully toward him was probably close to fifty, with blond hair and a familiar face. He searched his memory and came up with a name.

Denise Hendrix. Ford's mother.

\* \* \*

PATIENCE WATCHED THE big, bad bodyguard back up when faced with his business partner's mother. She settled in to watch what she knew would be an excellent show.

Denise Hendrix had six children. Patience was sure she loved them all equally, but five of them were living in town with the sixth risking his life serving his country. Any mother would get a little intense about that.

Denise stopped in front of Justice.

“You’re the reason my son is finally coming home.”

Justice swallowed. Patience would swear something very close to fear invaded his eyes. He held up both hands in a gesture that looked two parts protection, one part surrender.

“I, uh—”

Denise nodded, blinking back tears. “I’ve been praying for this. He was so upset when he left. Of course he was.” She glanced at Patience. “I blame Maeve. I’ve forgiven her, of course. Still, did he have to stay gone? It’s been years and years. I know his work is dangerous—he won’t talk about it. He emails. Because an email is as good as a visit?”

She turned back to Justice. “Then you came here and decided to open your business. I can’t thank you enough.”

“We, uh, thought—”

She nodded and wiped her cheeks. “I know. It wasn’t all you. But I was starting to think he would never come back and now he’ll be here. I have to make sure he never leaves again.”

Poor Ford, Patience thought. She hoped he knew what he was getting into by returning to his hometown.

“Thank you,” Denise said, then lunged forward.

Patience was sure Justice knew a dozen moves to ward off his friend’s mother. But instead of using any of them, he simply endured the long hug.

When he was finally free, he managed a strangled “You’re welcome.”

Denise sniffed. “I remember when you were just a teenager, Justice. You were a good friend to Ford. I’m glad you found your way back here.” She smiled at Patience, waved and left.

Patience turned to Justice. “Always the hero.”

He tugged at the collar of his shirt. “Mrs. Hendrix is very enthusiastic.”

“We’re all adults and you just had a significant body press from her. You should probably call her Denise.”

He winced. “I think Mrs. Hendrix is more appropriate.”

She grinned, delighted with his obvious discomfort. She liked knowing the very together and powerful Justice Garrett could be rattled by a middle-aged mother of six. “Uh-huh. She terrifies you.”

“Just a little.”

She started to laugh. “It’s always fun when a tough-guy facade cracks.”

His gaze narrowed. “You know a lot of tough guys?”

“You’re my first, but it’s way more appealing than I thought it would be. Just so you know—later I’m going to ask you to show me how to disarm someone with a Q-tip.”

“Why are you afraid of someone with a Q-tip?”

She crossed to him and put her hands on her hips. “Very funny. You know what I mean.”

“I do and a Q-tip is a pretty silly weapon.”

“A spoon, then.”

“You can do a lot with a spoon.”

As he spoke, he put his hands on her waist, drawing her against him. She went willingly, aware of the sudden interest from her girl parts. She was conscious of the danger, but the possibility of being left seemed less significant now that they were standing so close. And the possibility of him kissing her again seemed so much more important.

They weren’t touching anywhere good. At least not yet. But she was close enough to feel the heat of him.

He was tall and broad and strong and should be someone who made her nervous. Only he didn’t. It was probably their past. Because she’d adored the boy, she trusted the man. She’d been predisposed to like him from the second he’d returned to her life. She could only hope he wouldn’t prove to be yet another romantic mistake.

She gazed into his eyes, noting the various colors of blue that made up his irises. His lashes were slightly darker than his hair. With his chiseled chin and high cheekbones, he was handsome but still masculine. All in all, an impressive package.

“What on earth are you doing in this tiny town?” she asked. “Shouldn’t you have settled down in Paris or New York?”

“My French sucks and Angel hates New York.”

Good information but it didn’t answer the real question. Probably because she hadn’t asked it. Are you going to break my heart? That’s what she really wanted to know.

Apparently Justice was a mind reader in addition to his other bodyguard-based skills, because his gaze intensified.

“I’m not one of the good guys. You have to know that.”

She wasn’t sure if he meant the information was common knowledge or that it was important for her to realize the fact. In the end, she supposed it didn’t matter.

“Does it occur to you by saying that, you’re proving the opposite?” she asked.

He moved his hands to the bottom of her T-shirt. He pulled on the fabric, studying the design. “Flamingos?”

“They’re fun birds who love a good martini.”

“I can see that.”

His gaze locked with hers. He raised his arms and slid his fingers through her hair. “What the hell am I going to do with you?”

She supposed she should be quiet and let him work through the problem on his own. However, the answer seemed obvious and she couldn’t help saying, “Kiss me.”

One corner of his mouth turned up. “Why didn’t I think of that?”

Still cupping her head, he leaned in and pressed his lips to hers. She rested her hands against his chest and let her eyes sink closed. The feel of his mouth—soft, yet firm, anchored her in place. In the space of a single heartbeat, she knew surrender was inevitable. Maybe not today, but soon. When he asked, she would say yes. Not because of how long it had been but because this was Justice and she’d felt connected to him for half her life.

There would be consequences. There were always consequences. She would figure out a way to keep her heart safe. But that was for later....

She tilted her head, then slid her hands up to his shoulders. He dropped his to her hips and drew her against him. Even as his tongue slipped inside and brushed against hers, his fingers settled on her rear and squeezed.

She sank against him, letting his body cradle hers. The deep kisses stirred her senses. She traced his shoulders, then moved down his arms, wanting to feel all of him. Need took on a frantic edge.

He moved his head so he could press his lips to her jaw, and then he eased down to her ear where he bit on the lobe. Jolts of need and hunger burned through her and he licked the sensitive spot right below her ear.

At the same time he shifted his hands to her waist and began to move them higher. Her breath caught in anticipation. He kissed his way down her neck. She let her head fall back and waited for his fingers to touch her—

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